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AUTHOR Nelson, James E.; Beatty, P. A.
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ABSTRACT

A 48-item questionnaire was administered to all entering freshmen at two midwestern colleges (N=2,180). On the basis of a factor analysis, a six-term factor of premarital sexual experience and a four-item factor of attitude toward premarital sexual intercourse were isolated. Scores on one or both of these scales were found to be related to strength of religious belief, age of subject, sex of subject, size of hometown, parental income, items tapping family interaction patterns, and various other demographic or attitudinal items. Further analysis was done to determine if behavior-attitude consistency as opposed to inconsistency could be predicted from any of the variables which were found to be predictive of one's attitude or sexual behavior. Neither the demographic information, nor any of the items relating to upbringing, nor any of the other attitudinal items discriminated between students with consistent attitudes and reported sexual experience and those who were inconsistent. (Author)

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MPA Talk

Correspondence Between Sexual Attitudes and Behavior in College Freshmen

James E. Nelson
P. A. Beatty

The sexual attitudes and behaviors of Americans have been a topic of scientific investigations since the turn of the century. Most of the early studies were small in scope with subject selection primarily based on finding individuals willing to report their sexual attitudes and behaviors. The Kinsey research attempted to correct both of these problems by greatly increasing the sample size and by spending weeks and sometimes months pursuing an individual scheduled to be interviewed. This individualized approach has much to recommend it but it is financially and temporally too burdensome for the typical researcher. With the advent of the sexual revolution in the 1960's individuals became much more willing to discuss or report on their sexual attitudes and behaviors. Parenthetically, this may be the revolution in itself. Evidence of the increased willingness of subjects to participate in research on sexual matters is the success which Masters and Johnson have had in recruiting subjects and the large number of respondents answering the Research Questionnaire on sex which appeared in the July, 1969, issue of Psychology Today. Over 20,000 individuals voluntarily returned the questionnaire.

Again, Masters and Johnson's approach is beyond the capabilities of the average researcher. Athanasiou and Shaver's method (Psychology Today Questionnaire) on the other hand reduces the financial and temporal burdens on the researcher, but retains a strong possibility of sampling bias.

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In order to capitalize upon the possible temporary situation which I have referred to as the Sexual Revolution and the data gathering opportunities that arrived with it and to test the generalizability of the results of the Psychology Today survey, research was initiated the fall of 1970 on two midwestern college campuses.

METHOD

One of the two schools selected was a public university with an entering freshman class of approximately 2000. The other school was a private college with approximately 800 freshman students. An attempt was made to contact and request participation of all freshmen in each school. Almost 2200 students completed the questionnaire. This represents the vast majority of students contacted.

Assesment was made using the self-report questionnaire method administered in a group setting. The assesment instrument was a 48 item questionnaire made up of the following: 1) Demographic and socioeconomic questions taken from previous research done on the population of this geographical area (Falk, 1968; Collette, 1969); 2) Questions designed to detect an unwillingness to answer the other items candidly; 3) A battery of items gathered from various publications (primarily Weaver's Sexual Permissiveness Scale and the Psychology Today Questionnaire.)

From the original 2180 participants, all individuals answering abnormally high or low on the MMPI lie scales or admitting even the slightest possible discrepancy in a straight forward truthfulness question were eliminated from the final sample. Any individual who also did not complete any one of the questions that comprised the empirically derived sexual attitude or sexual behavior scales was also eliminated. Table 1 shows the final population breakdown.

The attitude toward premarital intercourse scale and the premarital sexual behavior scale were developed using the principal factor method of factor analysis with varying rotation. Two predominant factors emerged: A behavior factor and an attitude factor. Subsequent analysis of these factors showed them to be actually oblique in nature with a correlation of +.45 between the factors. From these two factors four items were selected for the attitude scale and 6 items were selected for the behavior scale. Subsequent cross-validation of the behavioral scale with the Guttman scale developed by Brady and Levitt (1965) produced a correlation of .91. (The coefficient of reproducability in our sample for the Guttman scale was .96). Validation of the attitude scale other than face validity and the construct validity of the factor analysis has not been made.

Results

First, very briefly compaing our findings to the results of the Psyc - ology Today questionnaire, our subjects were much younger than the nation l survey, reported much less sexual experience and generally had much more conservative attitudes toward premarital sexual intercourse.

As shown in Table II of the handout, we found a large sex difference in attitudes toward premarital intercourse with the males showing more favorable attitudes than the females.

A similar difference in reported sexual experience was also found (Table III), but as in the Psychology Today results, the sex difference in behavior appears to be less than that in attitudes.

The differences in attitudes and reported sexual behavior between the state university and the private college were much smaller than the differences between male and female respondents (See Tables IV and V). Although we did take college of the respondent into account in analyzing for the effects of all other variables, the college the respondent was attending was of little consequence.

As in the results of the Psychology Today survey, we found a very strong relationship between strength of religious belief and both attitudes toward premarital intercourse and reported sexual experience (See Tables VI and VII).

The correlation between the responses to the four-category strength of religious belief question and our attitude scale was +.398. The relationship between strength of religious belief and reported sexual behavior was +.258.

Attitude toward premarital intercourse was also found to be related to the size of the hometown in which the respondent was raised. Behavior scale scores were not. In general, there was a negative relationship between size of home town and a respondent's feelings towards premarital intercourse. (That is, the students from the farm communities and the very small towns held the most unfavorable attitudes toward premarital intercourse. However the relationship was not simply linear.)

Parental income was related to both attitudes toward premarital intercourse and reported sexual experience. The correlations were -.129 and -.134, respectively. In both cases, then, liberality was associated with greater parental income.

Although our sample was extremely homogeneous in age, age was signigicantly related to both attitude toward premarital intercourse and reported sexual experience. The youngest subjects reported the least sexual experience and held the least favorable attitude toward premarital intercourse.

In addition to the relationships I have already mentioned between various demographic variables and attitude scale score or behavior scale score, several other items tapping family interaction patterns and many other attitudinal items were significantly correlated with one or both of these scales.

Rather than attempt to present any of these additional relationships, I want to describe another way in which we utilized this data.

The overall correlation between the attitude scale score and the behavior scale score was .56.

Making up this correlation were subjects whose attitude score and behavior score were consistent, (Attitudes and behavior scores were either both liberal, or both moderate and conservative.) and subjects who showed large inconsistencies between their attitudes toward premarital sexual intercourse and their

reported premarital sexual experience.

Although there has been a tremendous amount of work done based on predictions from consistency theories, very little research has focused upon individual difference variables as they may relate to cognitive consistency or the need to reduce inconsistency.

Based on the findings I have briefly reviewed of relationships between various demographic factors and one's attitude or past sexual behaviors, we asked whether there were any variables which differentiated students whose behavior scale score and attitude scale score were very consistent from those whose scores were very inconsistent.

We decided to use an extreme groups design.

First we constructed a difference distribution for each sex. This was simply a distribution of individual subjects' Behavior scale score minus attitude scale score. The distributions for each sex were nearly normal in shape with neither sex showing a greater tendency toward inconsistency.

Next we selected the extreme lower and upper 16% of the distributions for each sex and the middle 16%. Combining the males and females who met these selection criteria we now had three subgroups (See Table VIII).

Group I was made up of respondents who showed a large discrepancy in their two scores and the nature of the discrepancy was that their behavior scale score was much more liberal than their attitude scale score. These respondents reported much more sexual experience than one would predict from their attitudes.

Group II was made up of respondents who showed consistency between their attitudes and their reported behaviors. The absolute value of their attitude score and of their behavior score could be anywhere in the distribution--the defining characteristic of this group was their

consistency or the predictability of their attitude score from their behavior score and vice versa.

The third group was composed of subjects who showed a large discrepancy in their attitude and behavior scores, but in the opposite direction of those in Group I. The subjects in Group III reported much less sexual experience than one would predict from their attitude scores.

The question we then posed was this - Could any of the demographic information we had or any of the other responses of the subjects be used to predict cognitive consistency or inconsistency?

The answer can be stated quite simply - NO.

None of the demographic information, nor any of the items relating to upbringing (e.g. how often was sex a topic of family conversation when you were a child? Or where did you get most of your information about sex?) Nor any of the other attitudinal items discriminated between the subjects with consistent attitudes and reported behaviors and those who were inconsistent.

Although we were able to predict a respondent's attitude score or a respondent's behavior scale score quite well from his or her responses to other questions, we could not predict consistency or inconsistency.

As can be seen in figures 2 and 3, for those subjects included in the consistency analysis whom we were able to identify by code number in a follow up survey at the end of their freshman year (approximately 50% of the original respondents) the changes in attitude scale score and in behavior scale score were defferential across groups and in the direction predicted by consistency theory. In the analysis of each of the scales, the group by survey interaction was highly significant. The consistent Ss (Group II) showed parallel changes in their attitude and behavior scores. Subjects whose attitude scale scores were initially much higher than their behavior scale scores (Group I) showed large changes in attitude (toward greater liberalism) and those in Group III showed the largest change in behavior score. That these changes are not

simply regression effects was verified by comparing the changes in our inconsistent groups with those in subjects selected because they were both extreme and consistent in their scors on the two scales.

Tables and Figures

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by James E. Nelson
and Patricia Ann Beatty

Table I. Number of subjects on whom initial analyses were based.

	Public Univ.	Private College	Total
Male	579	217	796
Female	358	265	623
Total	937	482	1419

Table II - Attitude Scale Means*

	Male	Female
Mean	3.1985	3.9055

*Range: 1.00-5.00
(The lower the score, the more favorable the attitude toward premarital sexual behavior)

Table III - Behavior Scale Means*

	Male	Female
Mean	3.6931	3.9843

*Range: 1.33-5.83
(The lower the score, the greater the premarital sexual experience reported)

Table IV - Attitude Scale Means*

	State Univ.	Private C.
Mean	3.3871	3.7368

*See note (Table II)

Table V - Behavior Scale Means*

	State Univ.	Private C.
Mean	3.7735	3.9093

*See note (Table III)

Table VI - Attitude Scale Means*

	Male	Female
Very religious	4.00	4.24
Somewhat religious	3.25	3.94
Slightly religious	2.75	3.53
Not religious at all or Anti religious	2.61	2.57

*See note (Table II)

Table VII - Behavior Scale Means*

	Male	Female
Very religious	4.13	4.33
Somewhat religious	3.74	4.00
Slightly religious	3.46	3.62
Not religious at all or Anti religious	3.19	2.82

*See note (Table III)

Table VIII - Number of Subjects included in the consistency - inconsistency analyses

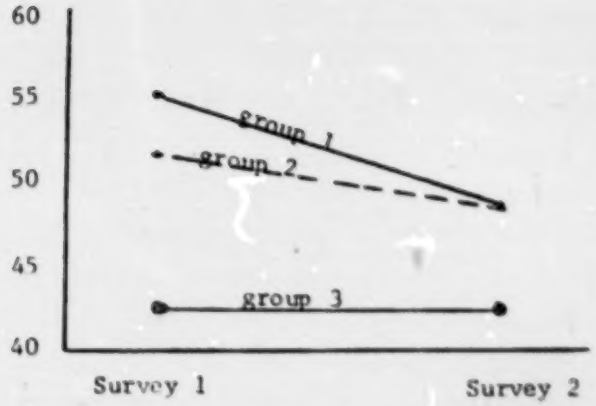
	I Inconsistent (Behav. Score < Att. Score)	II Consistent	III Inconsistent (Behav. Score > Att. Score)
Male	121	122	122
Female	93	94	94
Total	214	216	216

Figure 1

Transformed Scores
$\bar{X} = 50$

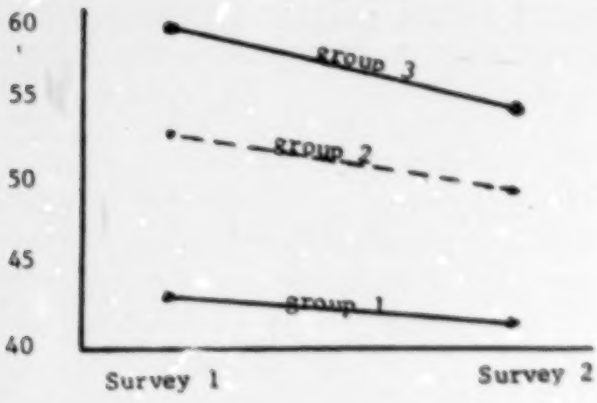
Mean Attitude and Behavior scores for the consistant and inconsistant groups

Figure 2



Mean Attitude scores for each group, for both surveys

Figure 3



Mean Behavior scores for each group, for both surveys